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ABSTRACT

Noting that the persistence of unacceptable trends in kindergarten entry and placement practices narrows the curriculum in kindergarten and primary education, constricts equal educational opportunity, and curtails the exercise of professional responsibilities of early childhood educators, this position statement of the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE) is offered to increase public awareness about educational policies and practices affecting young children. Following an overview, the statement discusses six principles of kindergarten entry and placement related to: (1) guarding the integrity of effective, developmentally appropriate programs for young children; (2) enrolling children in kindergarten based on their legal right to enter; (3) involving kindergarten teachers and administrators in student assessment decisions; (4) rejecting retention as a viable option for young children; (5) using kindergarten entrance tests in initial planning and information-sharing with parents; and (6) welcoming all children into heterogeneous kindergarten settings. The statement concludes with a challenge to make adjustments that would make education more responsive to the needs of young children, and to allow only those practices that are beneficial to young children. (Contains 48 references.) (KB)

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ED 445 775

STILL! Unacceptable Trends In Kindergarten Entry and Placement

a position statement

National Association of Early Childhood Specialists
in State Departments of Education

2000 Revision and Update

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PS 028611

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Introduction

The National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE) is a national organization of early childhood specialists who work in state education agencies. The goals of the organization are:

- to enhance the efforts of the State Departments of Education on behalf of young children;
- to strengthen communication and coordination among states;
- to influence and support policies and legislation that affect the education, health, and welfare of children and their families;
- to offer assistance and leadership in researching, analyzing, and recommending standards for quality early childhood and teacher preparation programs; and,
- to promote communication and coordination between State Departments of Education and other agencies and professional organizations serving young children.

For several years, members of the association representing all sections of the country, have observed with concern the persistence of practices which narrow the curriculum in kindergarten and primary education, constrict equal educational opportunity for some children, and curtail the exercise of professional responsibility of early childhood educators.

This position statement on entry and placement in kindergarten reflects those concerns. It is based upon current research as well as the experiences and expertise of NAECS/SDE members. NAECS/SDE offers this position paper in an effort to increase public awareness about educational policies and practices affecting young children. Our hope is that it will serve as a catalyst for change at local, state, and national levels.

Overview of Position Statement

For the last two decades the members of NAECS/SDE have continued to call attention to attitudes and practices which erode children's legal rights to enter public school and participate in a beneficial educational program. Dramatic changes in what children are expected to do upon entry and in kindergarten have resulted in well-intentioned interventions which are often inequitable, ineffective, and wasteful of limited public resources.

In 1987 the first edition of this position statement was published; it has been widely cited and continues to influence thinking. Unfortunately, the practices, which caused the members of the Association to become alarmed in the 1980's, continue—this in spite of a preponderance of evidence of their lack of benefit and even of harm to children. This update of the 1987 document has been prepared in response to requests from the membership and the early childhood field.

Classroom teachers continue to report that they have little or no part in decisions, which determine curriculum and instructional methodology. Instead, those decisions are made by administrators who are influenced by public demand for more stringent educational standards and the increased availability of commercial, standardized tests.

Additional pressure on kindergarten programs sometimes comes from primary teachers, who themselves face requirements for more effective instruction and higher pupil achievement. They argue that the kindergarten program should do more. In addition, a growing number of states and localities have raised the age of kindergarten eligibility, providing further evidence of changed expectations for kindergarten education and kindergarten children.

A number of highly questionable practices have resulted from the trend to demand more of kindergarten children. These practices include: 1) inappropriate uses of screening and readiness tests; 2) discouragement or outright denial of entrance for eligible children; 3) the development of segregated transitional classes for children deemed unready for the next traditional level of school; and 4) an increasing use of retention.

Two predominant considerations underlie these practices. The first is a drive to achieve homogeneity in instructional groupings. Some educators believe that instruction will be easier and more effective if the variability within the class is reduced. There is, however, no compelling evidence that children learn more or better in homogenous groupings. In fact, most of them learn more efficiently and achieve more satisfactory social/emotional development in mixed-ability groups.

The second is a well-intentioned effort to protect children from inappropriately high demands on their intellectual and affective abilities. When parents are counseled to delay a child's entry or when children are placed in "developmental" or "readiness" classes to prepare for kindergarten or "transitional" classes to prepare for first grade, it is often because the school program is perceived to be too difficult for some children. In this view, children must be made ready for the demands of the program, in contrast to tailoring the program to the strengths and needs of the children.

Delaying children's entry into school and/or segregating them into extra-year classes actually labels children as failures at the outset of their school experience. These practices are simply subtle forms of retention. Not only is there a preponderance of evidence that there is no academic benefit from retention in its many forms, but there also appear to be threats to the social-emotional development of the child subjected to such practices. The educational community can no longer afford to ignore the consequences of policies and practices which: 1) assign the burden of responsibility to the child, rather than the program; 2) place the child at risk of failure, apathy toward school, and demoralization; and 3) fail to contribute to quality early childhood education.

Therefore, NAECS/SDE calls for policymakers, educators, and all concerned about young children to use the summary principles and discussions which follow to guide and inform decisions about kindergarten entry and placement:

Summary of Principles for Kindergarten Entry and Placement

by the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education

1 *KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS GUARD THE INTEGRITY OF EFFECTIVE, DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PROGRAMS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN . . . THEY DO NOT YIELD TO PRESSURE FOR ACCELERATION OF NARROWLY FOCUSED SKILL-BASED CURRICULA OR THE ENFORCEMENT OF ACADEMIC STANDARDS DERIVED WITHOUT REGARD FOR WHAT IS KNOWN ABOUT YOUNG CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING.*

2 *CHILDREN ARE ENROLLED IN KINDERGARTEN BASED ON THEIR LEGAL RIGHT TO ENTER . . .*
. . . FAMILIES ARE NOT COUNSELED OR PRESSURED TO DELAY ENTRANCE OF THEIR CHILDREN FOR A YEAR BY KEEPING THEM AT HOME OR ENROLLING THEM IN OTHER PROGRAMS. RATHER, FAMILIES ARE STRONGLY ENCOURAGED TO ENROLL AGE-ELIGIBLE CHILDREN.

3 *KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS ARE INFORMED ABOUT ASSESSMENT STRATEGIES AND TECHNIQUES AND ARE INVOLVED RESPONSIBLY IN THEIR USE . . .*
. . . THEY DO NOT DEFER ASSESSMENT DECISIONS SOLELY TO PSYCHOMETRICIANS AND TEST PUBLISHERS.

4 *RETENTION IS REJECTED AS A VIABLE OPTION FOR YOUNG CHILDREN . . .*
. . . IT IS NOT PERPETUATED ON THE BASIS OF FALSE ASSUMPTIONS AS TO ITS EDUCATIONAL BENEFIT.

5 *TESTS USED AT KINDERGARTEN ENTRANCE ARE VALID, RELIABLE, AND HELPFUL IN INITIAL PLANNING AND INFORMATION-SHARING WITH PARENTS . . .*
. . . THEY ARE NOT USED TO CREATE BARRIERS TO SCHOOL ENTRY OR TO SORT CHILDREN INTO WHAT ARE PERCEIVED TO BE HOMOGENEOUS GROUPS.

6 *ALL CHILDREN ARE WELCOMED - AS THEY ARE - INTO HETEROGENEOUS KINDERGARTEN SETTINGS . . .*
. . . THEY ARE NOT SEGREGATED INTO EXTRA-YEAR PROGRAMS PRIOR TO OR FOLLOWING REGULAR KINDERGARTEN.

Discussion of Principle 1

- KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS GUARD THE INTEGRITY OF EFFECTIVE, DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PROGRAMS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

  . . .

  . . . THEY DO NOT YIELD TO PRESSURE FOR ACCELERATION OF NARROWLY FOCUSED SKILL-DRIVEN CURRICULA OR THE ENFORCEMENT OF ACADEMIC STANDARDS DERIVED WITHOUT REGARD FOR WHAT IS KNOWN ABOUT YOUNG CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING.

Most of the questionable entry and placement practices that have emerged in recent years have their genesis in concerns over children's capacities to cope with an increasingly inappropriate curriculum in the kindergarten. External pressures in recent decades have so changed the focus of the curriculum in kindergarten that it is often difficult to distinguish between curriculum and methodology in classrooms for young children and those of later elementary grades.

Several factors have interacted to bring about those changes. Research about the capabilities of young children has been misrepresented and misunderstood. A popular belief has developed that children are smarter now primarily because of exposure to television and because so many go to preschool. A rather large number of overzealous parents have also contributed to the problem by insisting that their children be "taught" more and by expecting these children to learn to read in kindergarten. This parental view of kindergarten has reinforced the notion that didactic methods of teaching (many of questionable value even for older elementary children) should be accepted practice in kindergarten.

Too often teachers are told, or they believe, that it is not enough to set the stage for learning by preparing a rich and varied environment and encouraging children to engage in activities which carry their development forward. In too many kindergartens, the core of rich creative experiences with real materials have now been replaced with abstract curriculum materials requiring pencil-and-paper responses. Often these are linked to tightly sequenced and often inappropriate grade-level lists of expected skill acquisition in each of the subject areas. Ironically, children who are ready to learn to read are more likely to advance as far as they are able in an active learning classroom.

(Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Goodlad & Anderson, 1987; Hills, 1987a; IRA & NAEYC, 1998; Kagan et al, 1995; Katz, 1991; NAEYC & NAECS/SDE, 1991; Shore, 1998; Shipman, 1987; Snow et al, 1998)

Discussion of Principle 2

- CHILDREN ARE ENROLLED IN KINDERGARTEN BASED ON THEIR LEGAL RIGHT TO ENTER . . .
  . . . FAMILIES ARE NOT COUNSELED OR PRESSURED TO DELAY ENTRANCE OF THEIR CHILDREN FOR A YEAR BY KEEPING THEM AT HOME OR ENROLLING THEM IN OTHER PROGRAMS. RATHER, FAMILIES ARE STRONGLY ENCOURAGED TO ENROLL AGE-ELIGIBLE CHILDREN.

Serious negative consequences accompany the rising trend to discourage parents from enrolling their age-eligible children in kindergarten. The dilemma is that the very children being counseled out of school are the ones who, if provided a flexible appropriate kindergarten curriculum, could benefit the most. The "gift of time" that many parents have been persuaded to give children by delaying school entry can result instead in denying them opportunities for cognitive growth through social interaction with their age-mates. It also implies that children have failed at school even before they begin. By the end of the primary level, children whose kindergarten entry is delayed do not perform better than peers who enter on time. Further, children who enter late are disproportionately represented in referrals to special education. This means their access to special help is also delayed a year.

Public schools cannot ethically select some children who are eligible under the law and reject others. Children subjected to delayed entry disproportionately represent racial and linguistic minorities, low-income children, and males. Denial of entrance to school, blatant or subtle, increases the disparity between social classes and could be construed as a denial of a child's civil rights. It places the financial burden for alternative schooling on parents. This is an equity problem.

Curiously, states with quite different entry cutoff dates perceive the same problems. While there is some evidence that older children tend to do better initially, the differences due to age are small and disappear with time. The specific entry date is irrelevant and recent legislative action in several states to raise the entry age will not accomplish what is intended. The quality and appropriateness of the kindergarten curriculum should be the focus of the reform. Age is the only non-discriminatory entry criterion.

No matter where the kindergarten entry date is set, there will always be a younger group of children within a given classroom. It is both unfair and unreasonable to establish expectations for achievement on what the oldest children can do. Delaying entry has been shown to contribute to greater variation among children in the same class –in chronological age, size, motor ability, experiential backgrounds, and other learning characteristics.

Educators should be sensitive to and respectful of the wishes of some parents to postpone their children's initiation into the larger world of school. However, school personnel also have the responsibility to assure that parents do not make this decision based on anxiety over the suitability of the kindergarten program for their child. Educators have an important role to play in educating parents about the myths associated with perceived benefits of holding children out of school.

(Bellissimo et al, 1995; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Katz, 1991; Graue, 1993; Meisels, 1992; NAEYC, 1995; Shipman, 1987; Shepard & Smith, 1985; Shore, 1998; Smith & Shepard, 1987; Spitzer et al, 1995; West et al, 1993)

Discussion of Principle 3

- KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS ARE INFORMED ABOUT ASSESSMENT STRATEGIES AND TECHNIQUES AND ARE INVOLVED RESPONSIBLY IN THEIR USE . . .
  . . . THEY DO NOT DEFER ASSESSMENT DECISIONS SOLELY TO PSYCHOMETRICIANS AND TEST PUBLISHERS.

Assessment is a process of determining whether particular characteristics are present in an individual or a program and the amount or extent of them. Standardized tests are one form of measurement. Assessment can also be accomplished through teacher observation, checklists, rating scales, and questionnaires.

Because testing is so prevalent, many teachers are faced with challenges for which their training and experience have left them unprepared. Today's early childhood educators must be able to: 1) recommend appropriate measures to be used in the beginning of school years; 2) interpret and use the information which the measures produce; 3) communicate to other educators and parents what test information means about student progress; and 4) prevent and/or correct misuses of testing.

To fulfill these responsibilities requires that early childhood educators become informed about the functions of tests and measures, their properties, and the legitimate uses of test data. Tests, which fit one purpose adequately, may be totally unsuited to another. Most importantly, early educators must know about the various forms of assessment, which can supplement or replace test scores.

Further, as children enrolling in school represent more diverse language and culture, new assessment responsibilities are placed upon educators at every level. "For the optimal development and learning of all children, educators must accept the legitimacy of children's home language, respect and value the home culture, and promote and encourage the active support of all families." (NAEYC, 1995, p.2)

As tests have increased in popularity, instances of their abuse have increased. Abuses occur when:

* Assessment tools are used for purposes for which they were not designed (e.g., screening tests used to diagnose a child's development);
* Assessment tools do not meet acceptable levels of quality (e.g., no reliability or validity studies are available);
* An assessment tool is used as the sole basis for a decision about placing a child in a specific educational program;
* An assessment tool is used as the sole basis for a decision about placing a child in a specific educational program;
* An assessment tool or test determines curricular objectives; and
* Test scores are used as a single measure of school and/or teacher effectiveness
* Teachers lack sufficient training and experience in the use of assessments.

(Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Hills, 1987b; Meisels, 1987; NAEYC, 1987; NAEYC, 1995; NAEYC & NAECS/SDE, 1991; NEGP, 1998; Shepard, 1994; Shepard et al, 1998; Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing, 1985)

Discussion of Principle 4

- RETENTION IS REJECTED AS A VIABLE OPTION FOR YOUNG CHILDREN . . . . . IT IS NOT PERPETUATED ON THE BASIS OF FALSE ASSUMPTIONS AS TO ITS EDUCATIONAL BENEFIT.

Retention policies should be highly suspect given the lack of demonstrated effectiveness and prevalent bias against certain groups of children. The current methodology used in selecting students for retention makes it impossible to predict accurately who will benefit. Pro-retention policies as a strategy for establishing rigorous academic standards are likely to be self-defeating. Lowered expectations developed by parents and teachers actually decrease the probability that retained children will attain their potential.

Although research does not support the practice of grade retention, many educators and parents do. It is true that teachers see children they have retained making progress. It is also true they have no opportunity to see how well the children might have progressed had they been promoted.

The vast majority of control-group studies, which are structured to measure this comparison, come down clearly on the side of promotion. Students recommended for retention but advanced to the next level end up doing as well as or better academically than non-promoted peers. Children who have been retained demonstrate more social regression, display more behavior problems, suffer stress in connection with being retained, and more frequently leave high school without graduating.

The term "ending social promotion" creates a climate that supports an increase in the practice of retaining children. Most schools are not employing less costly strategies that are proven to support children's achievement, thus avoiding social promotion. These include:

- high quality preschool;
- improving the quality of child care settings;
- full time kindergarten;
- lowered class size;
- tutoring outside of class time;
- summer programs;
- after school programs; and,
- multiage grouping.

Ending conditions, which prevent all children from maximum learning, must be a priority for us all.

(CPRE, 1990; Cosden et al, 1993; MBE, 1990; Goodlad & Anderson, 1987; May & Welch, 1984; Meisels, 1992; Norton, 1983; Plummer, et al., 1987; Shepard & Smith, 1986; Smith & Shepard, 1987; Shepard & Smith, 1989; Shepard & Smith, 1990; USDE, 1999)

Discussion of Principle 5

- TESTS USED AT KINDERGARTEN ENTRANCE ARE VALID, RELIABLE, AND HELPFUL IN INITIAL PLANNING AND INFORMATION-SHARING WITH PARENTS . . .
  . . . THEY ARE NOT USED TO CREATE BARRIERS TO SCHOOL ENTRY OR TO SORT CHILDREN INTO WHAT ARE PERCEIVED TO BE HOMOGENOUS GROUPS.

Kindergarten testing is a common practice in today's public schools. Unfortunately, screening and readiness tests are being used interchangeably to determine the educational fate of many young children before they enter kindergarten. Developmental screening tests broadly and briefly tap developmental domains and are designed primarily to predict future school success – screening to find children who, after further assessment, appear to be good candidates for selective programs. As such, they must contain predictive validity as well as the accepted standards for all tests of reliability, validity, sensitivity, and specificity. Screening procedures should include vision, hearing, and health assessments.

Readiness tests, by definition and statistical design, do not predict outcomes and therefore cannot be substituted for such purposes. These tests assist teachers in making instructional decisions about individual children. Children who do poorly on readiness tests are likely to benefit the most from the kindergarten. The paradox is that if readiness tests are substituted for developmental screening measures, certain children are being channeled away from the regular classroom.

Testing children who have home languages other than English creates unique challenges. Care must be take to use instruments and processes, which clearly identify what the child knows, and is able to do both in English and in the home language. It is not appropriate to make assumptions about proficiency in the home language based on level of proficiency in English. Careful assessment may reveal that the child could benefit from additional home language development.

A major problem with kindergarten tests is that relatively few meet acceptable standards of reliability and validity. Based on several widely used tests, the probability of a child being misplaced is fifty percent – the same odds as flipping a coin. The burden of proof is on educational and testing professions to justify the decisions they make in the selection or creation of screening instruments. Otherwise, educators are left speculating about what the results mean. Flawed results lead to flawed decisions, wasted tax dollars, and misdiagnosed children.

Even when credible, appropriate tests are selected, kindergarten screening and developmental assessment are still uncertain undertakings because:

* Normal behavior of young children is highly variable.
* Young children are unsophisticated in generalizing from one situation to another and are novices in testing behaviors.
* Young children may not be able to demonstrate what they know and can do clearly because of difficulties in using pencils or other markers, reading, writing, responding, or certain abstract symbols.

- Young children may not be able to demonstrate what they know and can do clearly because of differences in language and culture.
- Separation anxiety, the time of day the test is administered, and rapport with the examiner can all distort results, especially with young children.

Parents have a unique perspective about their child's development and learning history. For this reason, their knowledge about the behavior and attainments of their children is invaluable to teachers. Any full assessment of a child's progress must take the parent's information into account. Moreover, parents have a moral and legal right to be informed about the basis for educational decisions affecting their children.

Children entering school come from markedly different backgrounds. Assessment procedures must not penalize children at school entry for responses that have heretofore been appropriate for them or which they have not yet had a chance to develop. Screening and assessment does not substitute for an observant, competent, caring teacher and a responsive curriculum.

(Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Hargett, 1998; Hills, 1987b; Meisels, 1987; NAEYC, 1987; NAEYC & NAECS/SDE, 1991; NEGP, 1998; Shepard, 1994; Shepard et al, 1998)

Discussion of Principle 6

- ALL CHILDREN ARE WELCOMED – AS THEY ARE – INTO HETEROGENEOUS KINDERGARTEN SETTINGS . . .
  . . . THEY ARE NOT SEGREGATED INTO EXTRA-YEAR PROGRAMS PRIOR TO OR FOLLOWING REGULAR KINDERGARTEN.

The responsibility of the school is to accept children with the language, aptitudes, skills, and interests they bring. The function of the schools is to support the child's development and learning in all areas. The expectation is not that all children enter only with specific prerequisite skills.

The dramatic growth of extra-year programs represents an attempt by the educational system to cope with an escalating kindergarten curriculum and the varied backgrounds of entering children. However, these programs often increase the risk of failure for children who come to school with the educational odds against them. Selection and placement in "transitional," "developmental,"or "readiness" classes often brand the children as failures in their own eyes and those of parents,peers, and teachers.

Children placed in segregated programs often encounter lowered expectations, have fewer positive peer role models for success and confidence, and lack access to regular curriculum. For all of these reasons, their future progress tends to be more limited and many of them continue in the slow track throughout their schooling.

> "Regardless of what language children speak, they still develop and learn. Educators recognize that linguistically and culturally diverse children come to early childhood programs with previously acquired knowledge and learning based on the language used in their home. For young children the language of the home is the language they have used since birth, the language they use to make and establish meaningful communicative relationships, and the language they use to begin to construct their knowledge and test their learning." (NAEYC, 1995, p. 1)

Heterogeneous class groupings are more likely than are homogenous ones to encourage growth among children who come with home languages other than English or who are developing more slowly. Experiences within the regular classroom should be organized so that differences among children are valued rather than being viewed as a barrier to effective instruction. Flexible peer groupings, multiage and ungraded structures, and cooperative learning are some alternatives that can foster learning and self-esteem by valuing the gifts and talents of all children.

(Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Goodlad & Anderson, 1987; Gredler, 1984; Katz et al, 1990;May & Welch, 1984; Meisels, 1992; Nye et al, 1994; Oakes, 1985; Robinson, 1990; Robinson & Wittebols, 1986; Shepard & Smith, 1990; Slavin, 1986)

A Call for Action

The primary consideration should be what is best for young children, not institutions, politicians, or professionals. Children do not benefit from retention or delayed entry or extra-year classes. The case has been made that children are placed in double jeopardy when they are denied, on highly questionable premises, the same educational opportunities as their peers.

Belief in the pure maturational viewpoint underlies many of the deleterious practices described in this paper. The adult belief that children unfold on an immutable timetable, however appealing, cannot be over-generalized to intellectual, social, linguistic, and emotional development. A responsive, success-oriented kindergarten curriculum and a well-trained teacher are bound to have a powerful effect on young children's learning. Children come to school as competent, naturally motivated learners. One of the school's critical responsibilities is to ensure that these characteristics are maintained and strengthened, not destroyed.

The issue is not whether to keep children with age-mates. (Heterogeneous multiage grouping can stimulate and support children's development.) It is whether we can continue to uphold practices and program predicated on failure. Failure by any name does not foster success for any students.

What adjustments do schools need in order to make education more responsive to the needs of young children? Reducing class size, making the curriculum less abstract and therefore more related to children's conceptual development, and insisting that only the most appropriately trained, competent, child-oriented teachers are placed in kindergarten programs, and assuring every child access to a high quality prekindergarten program are among better means to achieving the educational goal of success for all students.

Limited federal, state, and local resources are being used inappropriately as a result of well-intentioned but misdirected policies. However, simply to stop retention and extra-year classes will not assure success for all children. NAECS/SDE recommends that attention and resources be diverted from ineffective policies/and directed toward seeking long-term lasting cures for the ills of the kindergarten/primary curriculum.

A consensus is needed among the educational community and families that only those practices beneficial to young children will be permitted. We can have equitable, excellent, and economical public education for all of the nation's kindergarten children.

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